DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 407 394 SP 037 310

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TITLE Applying the Theory of Reflective Practice to the Learner and the Teacher: Perspective of a Graduate Student.
PUB DATE Mar 97
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 24-28, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; Graduate Students; Graduate Study; Group Discussion; Higher Education; *Reflective Teaching; Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Collaboration; *Teaching Assistants; Teaching Styles

ABSTRACT

This study analyzed personal and collaborative reflective activities and their effect on the development of a graduate student as both a learner and a teacher. As a learner, the graduate student kept a reflective journal for 5 consecutive quarters (15 months). Collaboration with colleagues took place in both formal and informal settings and provided a forum for sharing ideas and getting feedback from peers. It also provided an opportunity to comment on the doctoral work of others as a beginning of the acquisition of research skills. The reflective practice of the graduate student in the role of teacher consisted of videotaped lectures, journaling, and collaboration with other mentors. The purpose was to help the teaching assistant evaluate the differences between his actual and theoretical teaching styles. The application of reflective practice helped the graduate student, as a learner, to develop constant curiosity and creativity as well as a constant desire to learn. Collaboration helped develop self-confidence. As a teacher, reflective practice helped him to develop a mechanism for constantly improving teaching skills. (Contains 15 references.) (JLS)

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ED 407 394

Applying the Theory of Reflective Practice to the Learner and the Teacher: Perspective of a Graduate Student

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A Roundtable Presentation at the Annual Meeting of the

American Education Research Association

March 25 - 28, 1997

Chicago, IL

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Introduction

Graduate students who assume the position of teaching assistant are placed in the dualistic roles of learner and teacher. These roles occur simultaneously as the graduate student both attends and teaches classes. While in the role of the learner, the graduate student attends classes and takes a variety of subjects which develop the knowledge and theoretical foundation necessary for the pursuit of career and future research.

While in the role of teaching assistant, the teaching of classes allows the graduate student to gain valuable experience. Furthermore, teaching classes gives the graduate student the opportunity to determine if the mental model he or she held of teaching translates into reality. Prior to this exposure, the graduate student may only have a limited understanding of teaching. Attempting to master the roles of learner and teacher places the graduate student in a very challenging position. Reflective practice is one means of helping the graduate student attain both goals.

Theoretical Perspective

Reflection is a process in which individuals are confronted by change and must make decisions on their own (Mezirow, 1994). In essence, individuals reflect in order to transform their assumptions, apply knowledge to fit a new paradigm, or reconstruct meaning in a given situation (Copeland et al., 1993). The concept of reflection can be thought of as two related parts, reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983).

Reflection-in-action occurs when an individual experiences some form of surprise and then thinks about what he or she is engaged in during the activity (Schön, 1983). One example is when a graduate teaching assistant notes confusion in the audience during a presentation and considers

how best to rectify the problem at that time.

Reflection-on-action occurs when an individual reviews prior experiences and determines what led him or her to that point (Schön, 1983). Using the same example as above, the graduate teaching assistant would consider how to reduce the confusion observed in future teaching situations. Utilizing both types of reflective practice allows the graduate student to critically self-evaluate, thus aiding his or her quest for personal and professional growth.

While in the role of the learner, reflective practice can benefit the graduate student in several ways: easing the process of change; creating a more self-directed learner; encouraging self-criticism; and giving new appreciation to the learner-mentor relationship. In addition, reflective practice provides the graduate student with the opportunity to become a more self-directed learner; an ability that could prove useful as the graduate student enters the research portion of a program.

Reflective practice can benefit the graduate teaching assistant by providing a means of self and peer assessment as well as easing the changes necessary to improve one's own teaching. Teachers can improve their teaching by critically evaluating themselves by reflecting upon questions like: "What is the role of my students in classroom activities?" or "What is my role in classroom activities?" and "How will my use of a variety of instructional strategies impact on my students?" (Ash, 1993). When teachers use reflection, they can personalize the issue of professional development (Ash, 1993). In addition, reflection can make teachers care about teaching and "...help teachers to become aware of the values that they have incorporated during their socialization into the profession..." (Korthagen, 1993). According to McBride and Skaw (1995), "As educators experience dissonance in their daily professional practice, the process of

reflection can help them frame their understanding of the world in new ways and potentially change their professional actions."

Methods of Personal and Collaborative Reflection

Personal Reflection

Personal reflection involves only the individual. Examples of self reflective activities include personal action research, keeping a reflective journal or log, reviewing old personal materials, or just thinking (Ash, 1993; Raines & Shadiow, 1995; Senge et al., 1994; Zeichner & Liston, 1987).

Personal action research can be accomplished when a teacher conducts an evaluation of personal assumptions. It can vary in detail from student evaluations to personally reviewing oneself on either video or audiotape (Ash, 1993; Liston & Zeichner, 1987). Another approach is a reflective journal or log that allows the teacher to capture thoughts and ideas on paper and then review them at a later date (Ash, 1993; Liston & Zeichner, 1987). The reflective journal or log can be prefaced by a guiding question to focus the individual or be used to capture random, unfocused thoughts. The same benefit can be gained from reviewing previously written material or correspondence, such as articles or letters, to once again see how personal assumptions and views may have changed (Collen, 1996; Marshall, 1990; Sebren, 1994). The last form of personal reflection takes place when an individual just thinks about his or her ideals and assumptions without writing them down or performing action research. Regardless of the form of reflection used, the result could be enlightenment, emancipation, or both (Nielsen, 1992).

Collaborative Reflection

While self-reflection is one way to practice reflection, it is also possible for teachers or

learners to reflect with colleagues through collaborative or peer reflection (Ash, 1993). Examples of collaborative reflective activities include seminars, dialogue, or small group collaboration that allows individuals to focus upon certain issues (Ash, 1993; McBride & Skaw, 1995; Raines & Shadiow, 1995; Senge et al., 1994; Zeichner & Liston, 1987). The group sharing that takes place can be either directed or undirected. Directed group sharing would require the group members to focus their thoughts upon either guiding questions or a theme that establishes a focus for the conversation (Pugach & Johnson, 1990; Sebren, 1994). Undirected group sharing allows group members to collaboratively reflect upon whatever concerns they have and can be global in perspective (Collen, 1996; Marshall, 1990; Sebren, 1994).

Methods and Findings

The methodology used in this study was the analysis of personal and collaborative reflective activities and their affect on the development of a graduate student as both a learner and a teacher. The methods and findings that follow are divided into the dual roles of the graduate student, learner and teacher. The subject of this study, the graduate student, was the first author on this paper. The remainder of this paper will will be reported as a personal narrative.

Role of the learner

The types of reflective practice that I used as a learner were keeping a reflective journal, collaboration with colleagues, and review of previous written material. I maintained a journal for five consecutive quarters (15 months) during a continuous sequence of courses. Prior to the start of these courses, no reflective journal had been kept. Journal entries were made a minimum of twice weekly and I reread the entire journal prior to the beginning of each new quarter. The journaling process aided in my development of ideas as well as stimulated my creativity and

established a sense of urgency to continue to learn. In fact, my dissertation project was at least in part conceived within the journal. While the specifics of my dissertation was not evident in the journal, the initial ideas that later became my dissertation were present.

With respect to the stimulation of creativity, the entries made in the journal have helped stimulate a variety of research interests tangential to the dissertation. These other research interests, which arose and were refined within the journal, were placed in a file entitled "Future Research," and are possible projects or papers to be worked on following graduation. Interestingly, the *act* of reflection through journaling led me to become interested in the *process* of reflection.

Collaboration with colleagues occurred with other graduate students from a variety of disciplines (education, pharmacy, business, etc.) and took place in both formal and informal settings. Collaboration provided a forum for sharing my ideas and thoughts as well as getting feedback and insight from my peers. In addition, the collaboration sessions provided an opportunity to discuss issues such as my dissertation or other research in a non-threatening environment and get critical feedback. It also provided an opportunity for me to apply what I had learned about the research process when discussing my peers' dissertations or research projects. This helped build my confidence as a researcher as well as foster the ability to change.

Review of previous material (written works, papers, posters, etc.) was accomplished by examining work I had done over the past three years. Through reflective practice, I was able to view both good and bad past work as part of a learning experience and a means to improve myself and continue to learn. In addition, the evaluation of previous material allowed me to see the development of my research interests over time. My interests at the beginning of the doctoral

experience and my current interests are not all that different. Interestingly, what I originally thought of as a separation from my past interests was actually an extension of those interests. I had not abandoned my interests, but instead refined them as I went through my coursework. What I have come to realize is that the interests that I brought to graduate school were not interests at all, but were actually my ideals and values.

Role of the teacher

I identified the benefits of reflective practice to the graduate student in the role of the teacher using reflection with the aid of videotaped lectures, journaling, and collaboration with mentors. The research setting was an undergraduate pharmacy school elective course in which I taught three lessons or classes. The purpose of this study was to allow me to evaluate the differences between my actual and theoretical teaching styles.

The actual teaching style was what took place within the classroom while the theoretical teaching style was what I *wanted* to take place within the classroom. My actual teaching methods were determined using self reflection with the aid of videotaped lectures as well as collaboration with mentors. My theoretical teaching style was determined through reflection, journaling and collaboration with mentors prior to the each lesson being taught. The results were determined by comparing the reflections about my theoretical teaching to the actual classroom events.

Findings indicated a difference between the actual and theoretical teaching styles, with the actual teaching being very technical and controlling as opposed to the theoretical teaching style which was more facilitator oriented. I attempted to engage the students during each lesson, but only succeeded during the final lesson. Whenever I attempted to engage the students and encountered prolonged resistance, I was then observed lecturing for the remainder of the lesson.

Upon reflection, I realized that I had reverted to a more comfortable and controlling teaching style when placed in an awkward situation. Lecturing was easier than generating a discussion.

Several reasons for the differences between actual and theoretical teaching styles were identified. First was my familiarity with the lesson content. In this case, the one lesson in which I engaged the students was the same lesson in which I was the most comfortable with the subject matter. Second, I realized that I tended to teach the way I was taught in the past. The predominant method of instruction that I had encountered throughout my schooling (K though 12, undergraduate, and even parts of graduate school) was the lecture. Third, the undergraduate students in the three lessons may not have been ready for an interactive environment after years of training into a passive student role.

The findings from this project have had a profound effect on my teaching. I now enter the classroom thinking about not what is the ideal way for me to teach, but instead what is the ideal way to help the student learn. I realized that while some methods of instruction are intuitively more appealing, all instructional methods (including the lecture) have useful roles when attempting to help students learn.

Conclusions

The application of reflective practice has helped me as a learner through personal growth, the development of constant curiosity and creativity, as well as constant desire to learn. In addition, collaboration with colleagues and mentors helped me develop self-confidence when presenting my ideas or discussing the ideas of others. In the role of the teacher, I benefited from reflective practice by developing a mechanism for continually improving my teaching skills. Whenever I enter a classroom now, I am constantly asking myself the question "Am I doing the

best for the students?" While I like the answer I get, as I reflect upon what I am doing, I realize that there is always room for improvement and that I can always strive to teach better.

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